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Against "Values": Reflections on Moral Language and Moral Education

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Abstract:

It is increasingly popular to ask educational institutions to do something about values. It is also becoming possible to take substantive moral positions in schools. We have become increasingly concerned about the morals of our children. Much of the discussion of values is incoherent. Many educators contribute to the public babble about ethics because of how they talk about moral questions; they have acquired a dysfunctional and obfuscating vocabulary ("values speak") for describing ethical phenomena and ethical issues. Assertions about values are distinct from assertions about character. The question of how to form democratic character is a crucial question that society has almost stopped asking. We do occasionally put the question as one about democratic values. While "values speak" seems initially liberating, nevertheless, it easily contributes to an authoritarian outlook. Four pieces of advice to educators are offered: 1) do not let "values speak" make you deaf to the nuances of the complex moral vocabularies; 2) learn to think of a liberal arts education as part of professional training; 3) an essential moral practice is dialogue; 4) support those trends in educational reform that increase opportunities for conscientious moral dialogue among members of school communities.

I have to begin by confessing that I have a significant liability as an interpreter of cultural matters about ethics. I don't watch enough TV. I will admit to a regrettable addiction to Star Trek, but beyond this I am not TV literate.

One consequence of this regrettable failure is that I still do not know who shot J. R. More to the point, I am a bit fuzzy on who Murphy Brown is or what exactly she was supposed to have done to destroy the fabric of the American family. I spent much of the 1992 presidential campaign in considerable puzzlement.

It is noteworthy that the public discussion of family values that surrounded her alleged

indiscretion did not give me much illumination either about the particular show and what went on that so offended then Vice President Quayle or about what is supposed to be at issue about family values.

Consider a few things about this flap. First, this is one example among hundreds that might be cited of the fact Americans seem increasingly anxious about the morals of their fellow citizens. Apparently we now suspect one another of being a nation of child abusers, embezzlers, and racists, and of being possessed of a host of other moral defects.

Another indication of the growing anxiety about values is that it is increasingly popular to ask educational institutions to do something about them. Despite our traditional reluctance to have the government tell us what is good for us, we are creating numerous courses about morals. It is hard to become a doctor or a lawyer without some instruction in ethics. Business schools are getting into the act. Ethics courses are even starting to appear in schools of education.

It is also becoming possible to take substantive moral positions in schools. Sex education programs now seem able to assert the virtues of abstinence. There are entire school systems that claim to be doing "values based education." That we tolerate such attempts by public institutions to inculcate values bears testimony to how troubled we have become about the morals of our children.

Researchers have found other reasons for concern. Clark Power (1992) reported the following:

Consider, for example, the following discussion with a class of high school sophomores concerning an incident in which a student had stolen a tape recorder from an unlocked locker and later bragged about it to his friends.

Leader: Should his (the thief's) friends express their disapproval?

Mary: I'd say you'd better not brag about it. You'd better shut your mouth or you'll get caught.

Sally: If somebody is going to be dumb enough to bring something like that into the school, they deserve to get it stolen. If you aren't together enough to lock your locker, then what can you expect. If somebody is going to steal, then more power to them.

Leader: Is that what other people think? It's okay if you can get away with it?

Mary: No, stealing is wrong.

Leader: Well then, do you have a responsibility in a situation like this to try to talk the thief into returning the stolen goods?

Mary: You can't put pressure on students like that.

Bill: You can't ask that.

Mary: This school is responsible for enforcing rules. We are teenagers. We have our own responsibility, but we can't be responsible for totally everything. It's totally ridiculous to put it on the students.

Bill: Yeah, the kids come here to learn, not to patrol the hallways. They come here to go to school.

Mary: We are the ones who are teenagers. The teachers are grown up. They are the big people. They are supposed to control the people in the school. We are here to learn.

Todd: You shouldn't steal. But the way society is, everybody does it . . . [Expressing disapproval] depends on a lot of things -- [like] who is whose friend. (p. 150)

Power commented:

This discussion reveals a disturbing gap between the students' acknowledgement that stealing is wrong and their willingness to accept responsibility to stop it. On a personal level, the students oppose stealing; on a cultural level, however, they are resigned to the inevitability of theft and tacitly support it. Mary, for example, warns the thief to be more discreet, while Sally blames victims who are "dumb enough" to bring valuables to school or to leave their lockers unlocked. Mary and Sally are not hardened street kids in a ghetto school; but are leaders in an affluent, high profile, semi-urban high school. They and their peers have come to take stealing for granted; school is just like anywhere else in society. . . . (Power, 1992, p. 150)

Americans have begun to notice that values have consequences for the public welfare and that our youth are not always what they should be. They wish schools to do something.

The second thing to consider about much of the discussion of values is its incoherence. The public debate about family values managed to proceed apace for some weeks without anyone having shown great concern for so elemental a matter as achieving even modest clarity about what was being talked about. I can make some sense of what it would mean to be in favor of chastity, fidelity to one's spouse, or care for one's children. I have some idea of what it means to oppose adultery or child abuse. If one names the virtue or vice, there can at least be some hope of a discussion about such questions as whether there is a public interest in people's morals sufficient to warrant governmental interference or educational intervention. Family values, however, is a moral inkblot onto which one can project what one wants. If we persist in using this sort of language, we can only babble at each other. Such language can easily become code for the expression of views and hatreds that we would not find it easy to express publicly in a clearer vocabulary. It is an easy vehicle for a style of campaigning that seeks to evoke people's fears, but it is not a satisfactory means of public debate.

The concern I want to discuss here is that many educators may contribute to the public babble about ethics because of how they talk about moral questions. My complaint is not so much that educators have benighted views about what is right and wrong. It is rather that they have acquired a dysfunctional vocabulary for describing ethical phenomena and ethical issues. This dysfunctional vocabulary frustrates our ability to have a coherent discussion and to get clear about what is at stake. Moreover, it can substantially warp moral judgment. Thus my concern with the common moral vernacular of many educators is not only that it is unclear or vague and thus is not conducive to a lucid public debate. It is also, perhaps primarily, that the vocabulary we employ structures our thinking in dysfunctional ways.

Specifically, I want to suggest that the fact that we use the term "values" so frequently and in certain ways produces much confusion in our collective thinking. We have learned to talk a language I shall name "values-speak." The We who is confused by "values-speak" is the culture at large, but especially the culture of public education. Thus, I fear that public education's principal contribution to public morality is obfuscation.

I shall approach this topic by making a few quick observations about teaching business ethics. My point here is not that the teaching of business ethics has been corrupted by "values-speak." Indeed, I am not especially concerned here about business ethics except for its illustrative worth. My hope is to emphasize how central the idea of character is to a reasonable conception of a moral life and to a serious moral education.

The study of business ethics got some of its impetus from insider trading scandals personified by the profiteering of Ivan Bosky who made several hundred million dollars from fiscal maneuvers that were both dishonest and illegal. Consider a brief thought experiment. Imagine that you have the young Bosky in a business ethics class and that you are required to give him a moral argument that persuades him not to engage in insider trading.

Threats and bribes do not count since these are not moral arguments. You must persuade

him both that insider trading is wrong and, thereby, cause him not to do it. Such an argument would not only have to be valid, it would also have to motivate. If we wish courses in ethics to alter behavior, we need to believe not only that we can produce intellectually sustainable arguments against such things as insider trading, we also need to provide arguments that cause people to act in certain ways.

This suggests that there is something futile about devoting intellectual resources to argue that lying, cheating, and stealing for private gain are wrong. Since those who lie, cheat, and steal usually already know this, one does not need to pay philosophers to persuade them. Perhaps it would make sense to pay philosophers to motivate people not to do what they know to be wrong. Unhappily, I know of few philosophers who know how to do this and even fewer philosophical arguments that have such motivating force. (There is some intellectual history to this incapacity. See Habermas, 1993, pp. 113-132.)

This discussion should support two points. First, moral behavior is the result of a complex interaction of habituation, cognition, and feeling. While I do not think that we understand very clearly how these factors interact, I suspect that in most cases cognition is a poor third in its motive power. What is most significant is character, and character is largely the product of training. Moral argument is likely to be persuasive only to those already possessed of good character. Its capacity to alter the behavior of those who are morally damaged is, at best, modest.

The second point is that any program of moral instruction from kindergarten to graduate school must first ask how character is formed by educational institutions. This point can be made most forcefully by returning to the example of ethics courses in business schools. People who enroll in business programs often do so because they wish to make money. An interest in profit is not inherently dishonorable. However, every interest has its form of excess which is its characteristic vice. The vice of the interest in profit is greed.

Do business programs create greed among a population that may already be prone to the vice? At a minimum it is safe to say that business programs provide a steady diet of courses devoted to the assumption that the point of business is to maximize profit. They may also establish a climate that abets the tendency of students to conceive the value of their lives in ways that are measured by money. If so, then the opinion that philosophers will constrain greed by a few subtle arguments against it defies belief. Greed may be in the fabric of the students' education. It needs to be combated there by instruction that tempers the legitimate interest in profit by naming its forms of vice, by cultivating countervailing virtues such as civic responsibility and personal integrity, and by creating a community in which these virtues are respected, nourished, and reinforced. Such virtues must be implicit in thought, word, and deed throughout. If not, then the philosopher's minor role of lending intellectual support to the virtues and of helping to resolve hard cases will be fruitless. Even worse, such instruction in ethics may serve as mere camouflage for the lack of serious institutional concern for ethics, and it may abet the sophistication of its recipients in the skills of rationalizing bad behavior. I trust that legitimization and rationalization are not foremost among the desired outcomes of instruction in ethics.

I have discussed business programs here not because they are my primary concern, but because they may illustrate an interest in ethics that is ineffectual because it fails to address the hard and central issue of how character is formed. But I suspect that this is true at almost every level of education, and I think that its consequences are far more serious in public education.

Schools help form character. They do so unintentionally and in thousands of ways. They form character by means of the nature of social relationships, by the mores that are implicit in both the content of the curriculum, but also in how the curriculum is taught and assessed. They do so in how they make decisions. They do so by means of the kinds of behavior they tolerate from students and what they do not tolerate, and, equally important, by means of the kinds of reasons they give for what they require. Most American children get twelve years - 15,000 hours

- of such character education. Yet this is not what many of us think of as moral education in the schools. Instead, we think of moral education as "values" education that occurs only when we consciously set out to teach someone something about values.

To think this way is to miss what moral education is about by failing to ask how the routine practices of schooling effect character development. I want to ask why we so frequently make this error. My proposal is that "values-speak" is part of the problem.

To see the point, we need to see how important words are to how we think and to what we see in the world. Consider a simple example from the world of sport. Someone who lacks the concepts necessary to describe a sport cannot even see the game. If you lack the concept of a home run, for example, you can only see people hitting white spheres over fences with sticks. You cannot see an event in a game. If you lack the concept of base stealing, you can see people dirtying laundry while charging canvas bags, but you cannot see stealing second. Pursuantly, you cannot have the proper feelings towards the activity. You cannot admire a shot well played, and you cannot be disgusted at bad court manners. Analogously, if your language is values-speak there is much about morality that you will not see.

Importantly, you may well miss the centrality of virtue or character. Consider the difference between the following two sentences:

1. Jones is an honest person.
2. Jones values honesty.

Do they say the same thing? If not, how do they differ? The most obvious way to characterize their difference is to say that the first sentence ascribes a durable trait to Jones. It says something about what Jones is. To say what Jones is is to ascribe to Jones the propensity for a complex web of thoughts and feelings. It is also to ascribe to Jones a propensity for a certain type of behavior. Character traits are inherently linked to how we act. To be honest is to routinely behave honestly.

The language of character also implies something about what we think and feel. Part of being honest is the capacity and propensity to have appropriate feelings about dishonest behavior. Honest people are understood to be appropriately indignant towards dishonesty. They are also the kinds of people who are able to give, comprehend, and be motivated by moral argumentation. We expect that honest people will be moved by persuasive arguments that a certain type of behavior is dishonest. Those who are not so moved are not honest. Thus the dispositional language of character links thinking, feeling, and acting.

However, to say that Jones values honesty is to talk primarily about how Jones feels. To say that we value something is principally to say how we feel about it. It is, at best, another step to action. To see that character talk is more intimately connected to action than is values talk, consider that it strains credulity to say that Ivan Bosky is an honest man, but it does not seem implausible to hold that he values honesty. Many dishonest people do.

Notice some other things. Character traits have a certain solidity to them. They are durable. They are acquired gradually and altered with difficulty. We know that if Jones is honest he is likely to stay honest and that if he becomes corrupted that will take time. Character has deep roots and stability. We would not easily deceive ourselves about altering character in a brief and shining moment of pedagogical finesse. It is much easier to believe that we can change values by modest interventions in classrooms. Values are fleeting. We may feel one way today and a different way tomorrow. While it is not always clear where feelings come from and how they change, they do not seem to be as deeply a part of us as are character traits.

The terms "character" and "values" are linked to intuitively differing views about how character and values are formed and how they are changed. Character is formed, inculcated, or molded. It is harder to think of values as formed or shaped. Talk about character is more intimately associated with training. If we think that character is central, we will want to be

careful about the habits children form, and we will be sensitive to the long- term consequences of the influences that we expose them to.

By contrast, values are the kinds of things that can be phony or unauthentic. We cannot know our true feelings and our real values and thus we may need to get in touch with them. Our feelings may be the result of psychological harm done to us by others. Talk about values thus moves us away from considering the circumstances of character development and in the direction of therapeutic intervention. Of course this movement is not absolute. We can talk about shaping values without being incoherent. Language often inclines rather than compels. It moves us by what it predisposes us to notice and by the directions of thought encouraged. Talk about character inclines us to reflect on training; talk about values points elsewhere.

Consider how the tendency of many educators to think in terms of values instead of character may come to infect areas beyond those directly linked to moral education. It has been a long time since I have heard a student teacher connect success in school with such traits as diligence. It is quite common to suggest that learning is a function of self-esteem. Although I am aware of little hard evidence that supports this second contention, many of my students find that it borders on the self- evident. The evolution of our preferred moral vocabulary may help explain this drift. Diligence is a character trait; self-esteem seems to concern our feelings about ourselves. If our preferred language is "values-speak," our chosen vocabulary will predispose us to talk about self-esteem in preference to diligence. Hard empirical evidence is not likely to matter much when our intuitions about what it is plausible to say are shaped in this way by our vocabulary.

Another notable difference between character talk and values talk is that it seems clearer that character is a public commodity. Values are more likely to be seen as private. By saying that character is a public matter, I mean that we generally recognize that we have an interest in other people's character. My welfare is affected by whether you are honest. If the business people, politicians, and educators of America are not people of good character, we will suffer collectively as a nation. Institutions and social practices that form people of good character are thus a significant matter of public concern.

Many states have as part of their laws governing teacher certification a statement that teachers must be persons of good character. This requirement exists because people believed that the character of teachers is one factor in forming the character of children. But consider how odd it would sound to try to say the same thing in a language of values. Imagine a statute that read "Teachers shall be people with good values." When I hear something like this, I immediately bristle. "Who are these people to tell me what I should value? They may have some interest in my behavior, but I may value what I want."

Why is this litany of independence evoked so much more readily when we talk about values than when we talk about character? I suspect that it is because we tend to see feelings as private matters over which we should have control and which need not be disclosed to others and may not be interfered with by others without our consent. But character talk is often associated with concern for the public good. Perhaps it is noteworthy that even those who placed the issue of family values on the table for debate in 1992, nevertheless raised issues about the character of their opponent, not his values. Values talk evokes concern about violations of privacy more than does character talk.

A durable tradition in political theory puts the central question of education as one about how character can be formed so as to fit the constitution of the state. (For examples, see Aristotle, 1941, and Gutmann, 1987.) Here the word constitution does not refer to a document, but to the general nature of the state. Words like "democracy" and "oligarchy" label different constitutions. Thus the members of a democratic society need to have a democratic character.

The question of how to form democratic character is, I would submit, a crucial question that we, as a society, have almost stopped asking. We do occasionally put the question as one

about democratic values. To ask the first question invites us to look at the overall practices of schooling and ask questions such as, "How does the way in which schooling is conducted affect the formation of the character required for life in a democratic society?" To ask the second question is to invite occasions where we try to clarify our feelings, all the while having to fight off concern that meddling with feelings is not the proper business of schooling in a free society. Thus the transformation of the concern from one of character to one of values marginalizes the issue. It liberates most of what we educators do from serious moral scrutiny (except when there is concern about imposing values), and it structures the question in a way that puts educators in charge of altering people's feelings, something that is apt to be strenuously resisted by many.

The case against "values-speak" is far stronger than I have thus far suggested. I want to make two other charges. First, I want to say that "values-speak" is simply too vague to allow coherent moral discussion. Trying to discuss a variety of moral issues as though they were merely issues about values is on a par with physicists trying to do physics in a vocabulary where the only noun was "stuff."

Second, I want to suggest that "values-speak" has a theoretical home. It is located in a nexus of theoretical assumptions that involve such assumptions as that values are all matters of taste that are beyond the grasp of reason. To believe this is to see values as things that cannot be rationally discussed. When we talk about values we import such assumptions uncritically into our discourse. In effect, the claim, "Values are objective," is an oxymoron.

To make these claims, I have to sketch some intellectual history.

Classical philosophy gave us a world in which the human good existed. For Plato and Aristotle, a description of human nature was not so much a description of people as they are, but was a description of the human ideal. This ideal existed for Plato in a world of forms that experience imperfectly reflected, and for Aristotle in people. The ideal was there to be actualized and could be actualized more or less perfectly. Questions about the good life and the good society began with questions about human nature assuming that to know human nature was to know what the good life was.

This world died with the scientific revolution - with such as Galileo, Newton, and Darwin. Descriptions of human nature turned out to have to do with DNA and evolution and not with the human essence. We were left with dead matter in motion and a nature devoid of moral significance.

The response to this was complex. I want to give a quick characterization of the response provided by Immanuel Kant (1755-1804). Kant's work is difficult and complex, but some of the broader features of his views are almost second nature to us by now.

Part of Kant's strategy was to divide ethical issues into two sorts. The first concerns what is right--moral questions. The second concerns what is good. "Is killing ever justified?" is a moral question. "Is canoeing better than skiing?" is a question about what is good.

The philosophical debate about the distinction between the right and the good is bewilderingly complex. There is no consensus among philosophers on any issues attached to this vocabulary. But there is, perhaps, a general drift that can be characterized.

The first part of this drift is that neither assertions about what is right nor about what is good describe nature. What, then, are they about?

Questions about the good, it turns out, are questions about things such as tastes, preferences, wants, and desires. In "values-speak" they are about values.

These entities--tastes, preferences, and values--are subjective in two quite different senses. First, they have to do with the inner world of feelings instead of the outer world of nature. Second, they are not objects of rational assessment. There is no right or wrong about them. Questions as "Is canoeing better than skiing?" have no rational answer beyond discovering what one likes and how getting it connects with the satisfaction of other wants and with available resources. Reason thus has only a precarious and instrumental hold on values.

Questions about the right are also removed from nature, but they are not usually seen as subjective in the sense that reason has no hold on them. Kant, for example, suggested that we can test moral claims by inspecting them for generality and consistency. No one can will murder as a general rule of conduct because to do so is to will oneself as a possible object of murder. Kant thus proposes a variant of the Golden Rule as a test for moral claims. Others, utilitarians, have proposed that we test moral claims by inspecting their overall consequences for human welfare, but, as to preferences, the rule has been that poetry is no better than pushpin. What matters is the intensity and duration of pleasure. While there is much to argue about in this, philosophers have generally not been willing to treat moral principles as merely matters of taste. The good has been less fortunate.

This Kantian bifurcation of the ethical universe into the right and the good has some costs and some benefits. Among its costs is the fact that philosophers have little to say to people about why they should be good. Ancient philosophers could address this question by developing a vision of human flourishing, of a form of community that sustained this vision, and of the virtues that sustained this community. They could thus provide arguments that showed people that there was a connection between their virtue and their good. In a world where the right and the good are separated and in which the good is a matter of individual choice, such arguments are hard to sustain. (See Habermas, 1993, pp. 113-132, for discussion.) On the other hand, a moral world in which the good is a matter of individual choice but where the right is objective is friendly to pluralism in that it provides us a way of thinking about public morality that is consistent with a variety of visions of a good life. Many modern liberals have mapped the right/good distinction onto the public/private distinction holding that it is appropriate to have a shared and public conception of justice but that people are entitled to their own conception of their own good. (See Rawls, 1992.) While I increasingly have some doubts as to the adequacy of this strategy, the Kantian vocabulary has been an important means for articulating a vision of a pluralistic, democratic society. Thus its fate in a world of values-speak is a useful test of the moral consequences of this way of talking.

"Values-speak" has two consequences here. First, it blurs the distinction between the right and the good. There are no longer tastes and preferences where we can want what we want and moral principles where our conduct can be illuminated by the light of reason. There are just values. "Canoeing is better than skiing" and "Honesty is better than dishonesty" are the same kind of statement.

Recall that "values" is a term that is a cognitive friend of terms like "want," "desire," "taste," and "preference." Thus "values-speak" does more than blur a useful distinction. It moves moral issues across the right/good boundary. In short, statements about murder, theft, honesty, and the like are just like statements about skiing. They are matters of taste--they have to do with what we desire or want. The right dissolves into the realm of tastes and preferences where reason lacks a handle and privacy is king.

I have said that things like values and preferences are often treated as things about which there is no right or wrong. The prevailing rule is "different strokes for different folks." Nevertheless, even those who think that one cannot make judgments of rightness or wrongness about values, sometimes seem to think that there are some things that can be said about the kinds of values we should have. For example, we can inquire as to the connection between some values and others. Desires can conflict. We thus may need to get clear about our priorities. And values can be authentic or unauthentic, phony or genuine. We can, according to some, be deluded about what we really want, be victimized by indoctrination into thinking that values that others have imposed on us are really ours. This is a bad thing. Thus we may need to inspect our values to be sure that they are genuinely ours.

Notice here that while we have begun to find that we can ask certain questions about values, we have not yet found it easy to ask about whether there are values that we should have

because they express duties we owe to others.

I want you to consider for their illustrative value some passages from a high school textbook entitled *Contemporary Living* (Ryder, 1980). The book is used in classes in home economics and decision making. As some of the initial passages show, it provides an excellent case of "values-speak." Notice where it goes.

Some persons cannot set up a dependable value system for themselves. . . . They hide their true personalities behind invisible masks and play roles inconsistent with their values and goals. They often become dependent upon family members or social institutions to guide them. (p. 75)

. . . when you are faced with a difficult decision, you will be able to rely upon your values. They will help you choose the alternative that will give you the most satisfaction in life. (p. 18)

As an adolescent you need to learn how society expects responsible people to act. You can incorporate this knowledge into your personal behavior pattern. Society will then accept you, and you will be able to participate in the functions of your community, state, and country. (p. 18)

You may find that you have to tolerate differences in your peers as you learn to choose your own values because they are right for you. (p. 49)

Legal status of marijuana. You should consider the legal consequences of using marijuana before making a decision about using it. A police record may affect your ability to find a job, to obtain a driver's license, to seek military service, and to take advantage of other opportunities. (p. 94)

You may feel shoplifting does not concern you. But sometimes you may be tempted or you may have a friend who is tempted to shoplift and asks your advice. . . . Whatever your situation, remember that good behavior enhances your well-being. Bad behavior can cause guilt feelings and other mental problems. You will have to make your own decisions and live with the consequences. (Ryder, p. 97)

What I think is remarkable about these passages is that the author always and consistently asks students to make judgments about values only by applying the criteria of authenticity and personal satisfaction. Even with respect to such matters as drug use and theft, the author seems unable to say something as simple as "Regardless of whether you want to do this, don't because it is wrong." The consequences for the welfare of others is never a criterion posed for the assessment of values. Why not?

I suspect that the problem is that a concern for the duties we owe to others is difficult to express in "values-speak." "Rights" and "duties" are terms that occur on the other side of the right/good distinction. When we move moral discourse over Kant's boundary onto the values side, we make it difficult to express the relevant concerns. When we are on the values side of the ledger, we have occupied a stance where it seems important that we should appraise our choices in terms of what is personally satisfying, but not in terms of duties and obligations.

Finally, while "values-speak" seems initially liberating, nevertheless, I want to suggest that it easily contributes to an authoritarian outlook. The reasoning goes something like this. "Every society requires order. Rules and regulations that people follow are thus required. But there can be nothing right or wrong about these rules. They are just values and thus are expressions of personal preference. However, since we must have order, some rules must be imposed." (This

line of reasoning may be implicit in Ryder's view that certain values are required if society is to accept one.) I hope you will see the element of moral fascism in this. Absolute skepticism about morality must lead either to chaos or to authoritarianism. The alternative is that morality lay claim to the authority of reason, but that has been abandoned.

Consider an example from a once popular book on values in teaching (Raths, et al., 1966, 114, 115).

Ginger: Does that mean that we can decide for ourselves whether we should be honest on tests here?

Teacher: No, that means that you can decide on the value. I personally value honesty; and although you may choose to be dishonest, I shall insist that we be honest on our tests here. . . .

Ginger: But then how can we decide for ourselves? Aren't you telling us what to value? . . .

Teacher: Not exactly. I don't mean to tell you what you should value. That's up to you. . . . All of you who choose dishonesty as a value may not practice it here, that's all I'm saying.

Notice the predicament of the teacher. He has told his students that nobody but they have a right to decide their values. He has also told them that there is no right or wrong about the matter. Now he has to explain to them why they cannot cheat. He cannot coherently say that cheating is wrong. Thus, he is reduced to claiming ownership of the class. In effect he must assert power, not legitimate authority, because he has asserted views that quickly lead to the result that all authority is equally arbitrary.

One last issue: We in Twentieth Century are engaged in revising our ideas about tolerance with consequences that I think will be most unfortunate. I think that our habit of talking "values-speak" also contributes to this difficulty.

Many people in our society believe that moral skepticism is the basis of tolerance. I mean by this that if these people are asked a question as "Why should we tolerate people with different beliefs, religions, convictions or life styles?", they will say "Since these things are matters of opinion, since there is no right or wrong about them, then we should tolerate diversity." In short, they see the idea that values are not objective as a reason why we should tolerate a diversity of values.

I want you to notice three things about this argument. First, it is important that it be distinguished from another argument that is often confused with it. That argument claims that lack of moral certainty is a reason for tolerance. This I think is perfectly sensible. If we cannot be sure that our moral convictions are right, that is a reason for great care in imposing them on other people. (J. S. Mill (1956) makes this argument in his classic *On Liberty*.)

But saying that we are not sure that our moral convictions are true is quite different than claiming that they cannot be true at all since they are merely values and thus matters of taste. When we are not sure, that is reason for additional reflection and discussion. When there is nothing that can be known, there is no point to reflection or discussion. Thus there is a great difference between lack of certitude and skepticism.

Second, any argument that moves from moral skepticism to tolerance must be inconsistent. The reason is that such an argument begins with a premise that requires that there are no justified moral opinions and ends with a conclusion that pretends to be a justified moral opinion. That tolerance is morally good, is a moral claim. The argument I have described seeks to justify it. But its starting point is that there are no justified moral opinions. That is incoherent.

Third, the idea that skepticism is the basis of tolerance represents a significant departure from the wisdom of our political tradition. Typically, for example, freedom of speech has been argued for by claiming that truth is most likely to result from an environment where opinions can

be freely asserted and argued about (Mill, 1956). Debate is essential to inquiry. Far from assuming that there is no truth to be found, this position assumes that tolerance is a means to finding it. Similarly, historically, freedom of religion has not been defended by claiming that no religious claims are true or that all are equally true. It has rather been defended by giving deeply committed religious people reasons for tolerating what they take to be the errors of their neighbors. Faith, many have held, is not the sort of thing to be coerced. Above all religious tolerance requires a deep respect for freedom of conscience. (See Locke, 1946.) Such respect does not require relativism. It requires a firm commitment to a set of moral principles.

Indeed, moral skepticism may erode respect for freedom of conscience. If I regard religious convictions as propositions that are both central to people's lives and that may be true or false, I can understand why my neighbors might hold onto their convictions with passion, and thus I can understand the violence that I do to my neighbors by attempting to coerce religious belief or practice. If religion consists of values - so many feelings, I may well see passionate devotion to some particular set of religious beliefs as pathological. I may regard intense religious devotion as on a par with an intense conviction about the ultimate value of black olives. A passion for olives is not something for which sane people fight or die. If religion is a matter of feeling and taste, if we regard religion as values - ephemeral and non-rational, we will not understand matters of religious conscience. People who believe that they must obey God and not men will seem irrational. How much protection are we likely to afford freedom of conscience if we think of it in this way?

I believe that a view of tolerance that depends on moral skepticism for its acceptance is ultimately dangerous to the institutions of a free society. This is so first because it must be inconsistent. The skepticism that leads people initially to advance tolerance must infect our attitudes about tolerance itself. Ultimately skepticism about values must become skepticism about the rightness of honesty, tolerance, democracy, and freedom of conscience. When people have come to see these principles as so many personal preferences, they will be unlikely to be moved to prefer them when they are inconvenient. When public respect for these commitments has become badly eroded and when hope for a rational consensus is lost, people will turn to leaders willing to assert naked authority. Thus I doubt the durability of a culture that has come to see its central commitments as merely "values."

I have claimed several things about "values-speak." I have said that

1. It inclines us to see moral education as having to do largely with feelings, and not with either character or cognition.
2. The term "values" is too vague to enable us to conduct sensitive moral discussions.
3. "Values-speak" tends to imply that moral claims are matters of taste or preference and that they have no rational basis.
4. In inducing moral skepticism, "values-speak" faces us with a position where any authority we educators assert over children is arbitrary. We must thus choose between chaos or authoritarianism since the alternative that some authority is justified has been abandoned.
5. While seeming to be a tolerant view, "values-speak" undermines tolerance by producing skepticism about the moral principles that support a tolerant culture.

Americans seem alarmed about the ethics of their fellow citizens. They are alarmed, I believe, with good reason. The violence, unfaithfulness, dishonesty, and simple selfishness in our society seems great and growing. Yet to express these concerns in "value-speak" is counterproductive. It is counterproductive because the vocabulary of "values-speak" gains its meaning from a perspective in which moral relativism and an emphasis on personal satisfaction are central. Thus those who express concerns for the declining ethics of Americans in the language of "values-speak" ultimately import into their discussion assumptions that are antithetical to their goals.

I have four pieces of advice on this matter to educators.

The first is to learn to listen to the varieties of moral speech. Do not let "values-speak" make you deaf to the nuances of the complex moral vocabularies that still exist in many places in our culture. Learn to hear these other voices.

Second, we should learn to think of a liberal arts education as part of professional training. Perhaps one of the reasons that "values-speak" has become so dominant in education, is that schools of education have seemed to believe that psychology, and especially the kinds of psychology that are involved in such enterprises as client-centered therapy, is central in understanding human beings to a degree that has excluded the potential of literature, philosophy, art, and religion to illuminate human experience. I think that they are wrong. The fact that so many forms of psychology begin by mandating a vocabulary whose descriptive capacity is impoverished in its ability to express the richness of human experience and human concerns seems to me to be the chief evidence for this point. (See Strike, 1974.)

Third, an essential moral practice is dialogue. Moral dialogue is rooted in the conviction that moral issues can be resolved by rational discussion and that moral decisions are legitimated by achieving consensus as the result of such moral discussions. Unhappily, many are now put off from moral argumentation by the erroneous belief that it is somehow an act of oppression to disagree with someone else's values. Treating criticism as a form of intolerance is a corollary of trying to ground tolerance in skepticism. However, not only is moral discussion an essential moral practice, participation in moral deliberations is essential to moral learning. Educators need to engage in moral deliberation about their practice. They need to be less enforcers of rules and more discussion leaders about the rules we need to follow. Above all, educators must be givers of moral reasons on those occasions when they must exercise moral authority. People learn what counts as a moral reason by participating in moral speech, and they learn many of the virtues of the conscientious moral life as well. Moral learning is dialogical. It occurs in the giving of reasons in conjunction with engaging in common human practices.

Finally, educators need to support those trends in educational reform that increase opportunities for conscientious moral dialogue among members of school communities. (See Strike, 1993.) The chief enemy of moral reflection is bureaucratic authority. When decisions are made by remote figures and passed down a chain of command, they are not seriously debated by members of the school community. Thus reforms that seek to enhance professionalism among teachers and involvement of parents and students in discussion about the education provided by the school is crucial to the moral education of everyone in the community. If people learn the arts of the moral life through discourse, schools must be places where it happens.

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